

This Day in History... August 14, 1883

Birth of Ernest E. Just

Ernest Everett Just was born on August 14, 1883, in Charleston, South Carolina. Just was an internationally renowned zoologist, known primarily for his work in marine biology.

After Just's father and grandfather died in 1891, his mother became the family's sole breadwinner. She taught at an African American school in Charleston and worked in phosphate mines during the summer. After noticing vacant land near James Island, she convinced several families to move there and start their own farms. They eventually named their town Maryville in her honor.

During his youth, Just was sick with typhoid for six weeks. He struggled to recover, and his memory suffered greatly. His mother had to reteach him to read and write, but eventually gave up. She hoped he'd become a teacher and sent him to the Colored Normal Industrial Agricultural

and Mechanical College of South Carolina, the only land grant school for education for African Americans in South Carolina. When he was 16, Just went to Kimball Union Academy in New Hampshire. Despite suffering the loss of his mother while he away, Just completed the four-year program in three years at the top of his class.

After high school, Just attended Dartmouth College, graduating magna cum laude in 1907. While at Dartmouth, Just first became interested in biology. He was a top student there, earning special honors in zoology, botany history, and sociology.

Just went on to teach at Howard University from 1907 to 1941, serving as head of the department of physiology at its medical school from 1912 through 1920, and head of the zoology department from 1912 until 1941. In 1911, Just along with three Howard University students founded the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity – which now has 900 chapters. Also while teaching at Howard, he became one of the first African Americans to earn a PhD from the University of Chicago in 1916.

During his time at Howard, Just met Frank R. Lillie, head of the Department of Zoology at the University of Chicago. Lillie also directed the Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) in Massachusetts, and invited Just to spend his summers there as a research assistant. Just spent nearly every summer over the course of 20 years there, primarily studying the eggs of marine invertebrates. He showed a great aptitude for handling and understanding these eggs, which led many researchers to seek out his help. He received the NAACP's first Spingarn Medal in 1915 for his work and "foremost service to his race."

Just had already published several articles by the time he earned his doctorate and quickly became an internationally recognized scientist. He was considered a "genius in the design of experiments" and did pioneering research in the process of fertilization in marine invertebrates, and in the study of cell surface development in organisms. He also explored experimental pathogenesis, cell division, hydration, dehydration, UV carcinogenic radiation, and physiology.

Just always hoped to be hired by a major university to provide a better income and more freedom to research, but few universities were willing to hire African Americans in high-level positions. He made more than 10 visits overseas to conduct research in institutes and marine laboratories in Berlin, Paris, and Naples. From 1912 to 1937 he published 50 papers based on his findings, as well as two books: *The Biology of the Cell Surface* and *Basic Methods for Experiments on Eggs of Marine Animals*.

Just was working in France when World War II broke out. Though he was encouraged to evacuate after Germany's invasion, he chose to stay to complete his work. He had been ill for several months by the time he was captured by the Germans and placed in a prisoner of war camp. His wife, a German citizen, and the US State Department managed to get him released, but his health continued to deteriorate on the journey home, and he died on October 27, 1941. He's the namesake of several awards, symposiums, and institutions.



Just was the 19th honoree in the Black Heritage Series.



Just studied the cells and fertilization of a variety of marine life.

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